

Ecological justice in the work of Puleng LenkaBula

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In 2006, Puleng LenkaBula graduated from the University of South Africa with a doctoral thesis on 'Bioprospecting and intellectual property rights on African plant commons and knowledge: A new form of colonization viewed from an ethical perspective'. In this article, a content analysis will be made of her views on ecological justice as expressed in her doctoral thesis and subsequent articles. The content analysis will be performed according to the following themes: (1) images of God in ecological justice; (2) expressions of this-worldliness in ecological justice, replacing the missionary sin-soul-salvation worldview; and (3) decolonisation as ecological justice.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Finally, concluding remarks will be made on LenkaBula's contribution to the science and religion debate in her publications, in which she oscillates between science and religion in her search for ecological justice.

Keywords: ecological justice; colonisation of Africa; decolonisation of Africa; African feminist ethics; intellectual property rights; bioprospecting; *botho/ubuntu*.

Introduction

Background

Puleng LenkaBula gained prominence in the public eye as the first woman Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Africa (Unisa) in 2021. However, she had a previous connection with Unisa as an academic in the then Faculty of Theology from 1999 to 2011. This article will focus on this academic period and the work she has done on ecological justice.

In 1999, LenkaBula started her academic career at Unisa when she was appointed as a lecturer in the Department of Systematic Theology and Theological Ethics. Here, in 2006, she obtained her doctoral degree with a thesis entitled 'Bioprospecting and intellectual property rights on African plant commons and knowledge: A new form of colonization viewed from an ethical perspective' under the supervision of Prof. M. Motlhabi.

In 2011, she became the adviser to the Unisa Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Prof. M. Makanya, a position she has held since 2021. In 2014, LenkaBula left Unisa to become the Dean of Student Affairs at the University of the Witwatersrand. In 2018, she was appointed at the University of the Free State as Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Institutional Change, Student Affairs and Engaged Scholarship.

On 01 January 2021, in the middle of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, Puleng LenkaBula took up office as Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Africa. Her second 5-year term starts in 2026.

For the sake of this article on her academic career, it is useful to take note of how she has introduced herself as an academic and African feminist ethicist in an academic article in 2007 (LenkaBula 2007b):

Dr Puleng LenkaBula teaches Social, Political and Economic Ethics, Feminist/Womanist and African Women's Ethics in the Department of Systematic Theology and Ethics at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Her research interests are in exploring the intersections between economy, ecology and ethics, particularly the areas of the land, property, and intellectual property rights on African Commons and knowledge systems from the perspectives of African Feminist Ethics. (p. 1)

Aim and literary sources

The focus of this study, then, is not LenkaBula's career in academic management but her work on ecological justice from an African feminist ethics perspective during her academic lecturing years

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(1999–2011). The aim is to conduct a content analysis by focusing on her 2006 doctoral thesis, as well as four additional articles and papers she produced on ecology and ethics in 2007 and 2008. The sources for this article are:

- LenkaBula, P., 2006, 'Bioprospecting and intellectual property rights on African plant commons and knowledge: A new form of colonization viewed from an ethical perspective', Unpublished DTh thesis, University of South Africa.
- LenkaBula, P., 2007a, 'Geneva 1966 and contemporary concerns for ecological and gender justice', *Ecumenical Review* 59(1), 77–86.
- LenkaBula, P., 2007b, *Poverty, wealth and ecology viewed from African Feminist Christian political and economic ethics*, pp. 1–16, World Council of Churches.
- LenkaBula, P., 2008b, 'Poverty, wealth and wellbeing and African feminist Christian ethics', *Practical Theology in South Africa* 23(3), 239–260.
- LenkaBula, P., 2008a, 'Beyond anthropocentricity – *Botho/Ubuntu* and the quest for economic and ecological justice in Africa', *Religion & Theology* 15(3–4), 375–394.

Literary overview

Very little has been written about Puleng LenkaBula's academic work, and therefore the literary overview will also comprise her own academic publications written in the run-up to her thesis – apart from the four articles mentioned above, on which this article will focus because of their emphasis on ecological justice.

In an early article (2002), 'From the womb into a hostile world: Christian ethics and sexual abuse against children in South Africa' in the *Journal of Theology for South Africa*, LenkaBula analyses the reasons for sexual abuse practices against children in South Africa. She asks ethical questions that are both this-worldliness questions, such as 'What type of society creates rapists?', and otherworldliness questions, such as 'Why does God permit sexual abuse against children?' – thereby laying the foundation for her subsequent work in which theological and societal analyses meet (LenkaBula 2002:57). Eventually, she identifies three causes for child sexual abuse, namely gender injustice, patriarchy and abusive interpretations of Scripture (LenkaBula 2002:61), thereby establishing another significant theme in her academic work that combines gender injustice with all other forms of injustice. In her later works on ecology, the relationship between gender and ecological justice is emphasised and almost taken for granted.

In 2005, 10 years into the democratisation of South Africa, which started with the elections in 1994, and 3 years after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had released its report, LenkaBula published an article entitled 'Justice and reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa: A South African woman's perspective' in the *International Review of Missions*. At this stage, LenkaBula was, as mentioned above, a (mere) lecturer in the Department of Systematic Theology and

Theological Ethics at Unisa. In this article, she warns against cheap reconciliation and calls on churches to put the quest for justice and reconciliation at the core of their witness and ministry. Writing as a 'black South African woman social ethicist' (LenkaBula 2005:103–105), she calls for justice to come before reconciliation and emphasises that justice has not yet been achieved in South Africa, especially not for black women.

After the completion of her thesis in 2006 and subsequent articles on ecological justice in 2007 and 2008, which are the focus of this article, LenkaBula (now a senior lecturer in the same department at Unisa) published an article entitled 'The shift of gravity of the church in sub-Saharan Africa: Theological and ecclesiological implications for women' in the *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*. In this article, she explores the expanding face of Christianity in Africa, especially vis-à-vis Pentecostalism, and asks the question of how this 'revival of religion' impacts women. LenkaBula (2008c) finds that:

Whilst not all of the growing churches promote an exclusivist theology that rejects the ordination of women, or that exhibits fundamentalist and literalist interpretations of the Bible, the majority do, and thus they limit the dignity and integrity of the Church as constituting the inclusive, compassionate and loving community that God and Christ have called it to be. (p. 303)

While the above tries to place LenkaBula's thinking on the three interconnected foci of African women, ecology and religion within her work as an academic Systematic Theologian and Ethicist, one should ask what the influence of her work on ecology is on present-day African women ecofeminists or ecowomanists. In July 2019, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, of which Puleng LenkaBula is a member, held its 5th Pan-African Conference at the University of Botswana with the theme 'Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Religious Imagination'. LenkaBula herself was invited to give the keynote address. From this conference, several books with revised papers on African women and ecology ensued. In 2020, *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Indigenous Religions* (eds. Matholeni, Boateng & Manyonganise 2020) was published, and in 2021 another three publications followed, namely *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Mission* (eds. Daniel, Kebaneilwe & Savala 2021), *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Biblical Studies: Interpretations in the Context of Climate Change* (eds. Berman et al. 2021), and *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Theology* (eds. Bosch & Chisale 2021). The latter is of special importance because of a reference it contains to the academic work of LenkaBula published in the 2000s. In the first chapter entitled 'When women and earth connect: African ecofeminist or ecowomanist theology?', Sinenhlanhla Chisale refers to LenkaBula's article 'Beyond Anthropocentricity – *Botho/Ubuntu* and the quest for economic and ecological justice in Africa' (LenkaBula 2008a:378) and used *Ubuntu/Botho* to 'highlight the fact that life (both non-human and human) is interconnected and, as a result, dualism or hierarchies are rejected in favour of communality' (Chisale 2021:14).

In 2022, *Mother Earth, Mother Africa: World Religions and Environmental Imagination* was published (eds. Chirongoma & Kiilu 2022b). As one of the latest statements on African women and ecology, the 'Introduction' by the editors, Sophia Chirongoma and Wayua Kiilu (2022a:1–7), is used here to summarise the similarities and dissimilarities in the work of LenkaBula and present-day African women on ecology. The similarities lie firstly in acknowledging the connection between economic injustices, gender inequality and the exploitation of the earth; secondly, in the three foci of reality, which are religion, gender and culture; and thirdly, in the use of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems in answering pressing questions in this field. However, there are also developments in African ecofeminism today that are absent – or not as pronounced – in LenkaBula's work. Firstly, the emphasis on women's ownership of land, while LenkaBula has focussed on African commons and plants; secondly, the present emphasis on African women as nurturers of the earth (or rather Earth) is not in the foreground of LenkaBula's work; and thirdly, the present spiritualisation of ecology from African women's perspectives and the re-awakening of the sacred is absent from LenkaBula's work.

The aforementioned books by the Circle seldom quote LenkaBula's work; however, mention should be made here of a publication devoted entirely to LenkaBula's academic work. Recently, in 2024, Beatrice Okyere-Manu, the Ethics Studies Coordinator at the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics (University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa), published the chapter 'Ethics, gender, and philosophy of Puleng LenkaBula', a chapter in the book *African Women's Liberating Philosophies, Theologies and Ethics*, which she and Léocadie Lushombo edited. Calling her a 'second-generation matriarch of the Circle (of Concerned African Women Theologians)' Okyere-Manu (2024:159) and an 'African Christian social ethicist' Okyere-Manu (2024:173), Okyere-Manu (2024:165–171) identifies the following themes in LenkaBula's academic work: (1) economic and environmental justice; (2) poverty; (3) human suffering and societal brokenness; and (4) gender stereotypes. In addressing these issues, LenkaBula addresses both theological and societal practices, which are summed up in this quote from Okyere-Manu (2024):

For her, the issue of justice should rest on the understanding that all human beings are made in God's image, and their dignity should be respected. As such, beliefs, institutions, markets, or policies that seem to undermine and dehumanize the people of God must be addressed. (p. 173–174)

Okyere-Manu mainly provides a descriptive overview of LenkaBula's work; therefore, a more in-depth analysis of LenkaBula's ideas on ecological justice is required here.

Research methods and design

A content analysis was conducted according to themes that emerged during the research of the literature in various

academic publications by Puleng LenkaBula. As the method of content analysis requires, these are themes that present themselves prominently while the author engages with the text. In this case, the themes presented themselves specifically in relation to ecological justice, which are the following:

- Images of God in ecological justice.
- Expressions of this-worldliness in ecological justice as a replacement for the missionary worldview of sin–soul–salvation and its pietistic view of ecological justice.
- Decolonisation as ecological justice.

Content analysis according to themes within ecological justice

Images of God in ecological justice

In her 2006 doctoral thesis entitled 'Bioprospecting and intellectual property rights on African plant commons and knowledge: A new form of colonization viewed from an ethical perspective', Puleng LenkaBula studies the impact of biopiracy by northern multinational pharmaceutical companies on indigenous knowledge and plants in Africa. She proposes an ethics model that 'take[s] seriously the plight of the marginalized, including the earth' (LenkaBula 2006:224).

The only place where LenkaBula refers to God (and Jesus) in her thesis (that is not in a quotation) is in the section on 'Justice and the Bible' (LenkaBula 2006):

While the examples of biblical verses (related to justice) which have been referred to in this section are brief, it is inescapable that justice was one of the bases for the reign of God on earth. Justice was and continues to be relevant in attaining the fullness of life that Jesus promises to bring on earth. (p. 178)

Acknowledging that God reigns over the earth and that Jesus has promised fullness of life on earth, there is no other God-talk in the thesis.

While there is little reference to God in her thesis, this is not the case in her World Council of Churches lecture published in 2007 under the title 'Geneva 1966 and contemporary concerns for ecological and gender justice' in the *Ecumenical Review*. In this publication, we find ample references to God as Creator of the Earth, all in inclusive language, that is, not using 'he' as the pronoun to refer to God but rather repeating 'God'. An example where she talks about women's theologies (LenkaBula 2007b):

They also made it possible for women and men to express their experiences of God as God is known to us in the world in which we live ... The key inspiration for these theologies was the pursuit for liberation from all God's earth and creation. (p. 78)

Combining gender and ecological justice, LenkaBula's God-images in this article are as follows (LenkaBula 2007a):

- God is the Creator of the Earth; God has created the Earth good; God embraces justice for all creation (p. 78).

- 'God does not exist outside and apart from the web of life' (p. 79).
- References to God in masculine terms are unacceptable and unjust towards creation, which affirms both men and women (pp. 79–80).
- The conclusion sums up the image of God vis-à-vis ecological justice, adding God as the One who loves the whole of creation:

The churches need to be diligent in our affirmation of justice for women, men and creation, based on our theological understanding that God created humanity in God's image, and also on God's declaring the goodness of all creation ... Thus we would appreciate God's love as embracing the whole of creation. (pp. 85–86)

The World Council of Churches published a paper of LenkaBula (2007b) in the same year with the title 'Poverty, wealth and ecology viewed from African Feminist Christian political and economic ethics'. In the previous article, LenkaBula combined gender justice with ecological justice, in which ecological justice is viewed from the point of poverty and wealth. The image of God entertained here is again God the Creator, who has made the whole of humanity in God's image and has given to all of humanity (not only the rich) access to God's resources and the Earth (LenkaBula 2007b:13). Here, LenkaBula (2007b) includes God-talk in her ethics, which she has not done in her thesis:

The ethical points of references for African feminist ethics are numerous sources. They include the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, women experiences and those of their communities, rationale, African culture and tradition, and dialogue with other knowledge forms as they provide lessons and resources relevant for the pursuit of justice and wholeness for the people and creations of God. (p. 11)

In 2008, LenkaBula published an article, 'Poverty, wealth and wellbeing and African feminist Christian ethics', on the same issues in a local journal, *Practical Theology in South Africa*, here combining economic and ecological justice. Using the classical formulations of Reformed confessions, the images of God that emerge are, again, those of the Creator who sustains God's creation, encouraging us to do so in the continuous search for (ecological) justice:

- Under the heading 'Biblical, church and ecumenical resources for economic and ecological justice', LenkaBula (2008b:253) asks the question 'Can we or should we accept the injustices promoted in the economy and earth as ordained by God?'. The image of God that emerges is that of God hating injustices rather than being seen as the one who has caused and ordained them.
- God gives the benefits of God's creation to all God's people:

The transformation and restoration of justice as envisioned by the prophet Micah, for example, includes the idea that people will enjoy creation and the benefits of the resources that God has given to God's people, and without fear. (Mi 4:4, LenkaBula 2008b:254)

Here, the image of God that emerges is that of God being God to all creation, sharing it with all people, rich and poor.

- God's people include everybody, but a call is made specifically to the church to transform economic and ecological injustices for all to enjoy the resources of the God-created Earth (LenkaBula 2008b):

The search for justice also requires the church not only to reflect, but to be actively involved in attempts to transform economic and ecological injustices that disregard the well-being of God's people and created earth. (p. 257)

All people are created in the image of God, and it is up to the church and its theologians to bring correction to the dehumanisation of God's people and God's Earth (LenkaBula 2008b):

Justice and well-being also require corrective or restitutive measures and interventions when the people of God and the earth are dehumanised and undermined ... The integrity and dignity of human beings, which is premised on the notion that all people are created in the image of God, require practical theologies and ethics to advocate for justice. (p. 258)

The image of God that emerges here is that of God sharing God's image of Giver and Sustainer with all people on Earth.

The image of God presented in this article, then, is that of God as Creator who wills (ecological) justice for all God's people because God has created them in God's image.

In the same year, LenkaBula (2008a) published another article in a local journal, the *Religion & Theology*, under the title 'Beyond Anthropocentricity – *Botho/Ubuntu* and the quest for economic and ecological justice in Africa'. Here, she explores the concept of *botho/ubuntu* in the search for economic and ecological justice, as she has done in her thesis (2006).

Ecological justice, she states, must be based on *botho/ubuntu*. *Botho/ubuntu* refers to the close relationship of dependence among humans, God and creation, or more closely, the relationships to the self, other human beings, creation and God. She (2008a:383) defines *botho/ubuntu* more specifically as follows: *Botho/ubuntu* literally translates as 'a human being is a human through other human beings, through the human self and through the physical organic cosmic environment and through God'. This, LenkaBula (2008a:382) claims, is evident in the Christian creation stories in which it is affirmed that God created humanity in relationship. Moreover, the relationship of a person with creation and the cosmic world, God and other human beings is integral to wellness and the well-being of all (LenkaBula 2008a:386). She points out that this belief in the connectedness of people to the Earth, God and others is celebrated in the practices and rituals of many African communities. *Botho/ubuntu*, not being a specific Christian concept, enriches and guides African Christian ethics in focusing on the relationship between God, humans and creation, which should be one of justice.

As far as God-talk is concerned, LenkaBula (2008a) emphasises that *botho/ubuntu* honours God as Creator, as the One who maintains the Earth – and also as the Liberator who walks with the oppressed and the victims of economic and ecological injustice:

Doing justice in the economy and ecology is to be understood as the active participation in the reign of God and its actual realisation in conveying the message that justice cannot be separated from the role of liberation. (p. 392)

In summary, then, the images of God used by LenkaBula in her publications on ecological justice are those of God as Creator and Sustainer of creation, working in a strong relationship with God's people to liberate the victims of ecological injustice and to maintain this liberation in the present and future. People should honour the call for ecological justice as bearers of this image of God.

Expressions of this-worldliness in ecological justice

In South Africa, as probably elsewhere, missionary piety and liberation theology stand in opposition to one another. This is especially true of the two issues that have been discussed in this article, namely the images of God used in these theologies and the religious worldviews of either otherworldliness or this-worldliness that support them.

Landman (2025:1–10) recently indicated at the 40th remembrance of the South African Kairos Document (1985) that documents inspired by the missionary piety of the previous centuries (such as those of *apartheid* theologians) depict God as 'passive', that is, as already fully revealed in Jesus Christ as described in the Bible, the God who cares less about the Earth and is ready to receive believers in heaven. However, liberation theologians (such as those who published the South African Kairos Document in 1985 with concerned laity) depict God as active and fighting on the side of the oppressed and marginalised in this world that needs change towards justice. Previously, Landman (1999) described missionary piety as otherworldly in that the first missionaries to South Africa came from a Europe where the *Aufklärung* had rejected their pietistic, world-unfriendly ideas. Fleeing here, the missionaries taught their converts to accept their earthly plight as God-given and to concentrate on the otherworld that awaits believers in life after death. This otherworldly sin–soul–salvation tradition of missionary piety disempowered believers in the fight for justice.

LenkaBula stands fully in the this-worldly tradition of Liberation Theology, in which God is actively on the side of justice and its embodiment in this world. This applies to gender, economic and ecological justice, but within the focus of this article God, in particular, calls God's people to fight with God for the created world and ecological justice.

The very first sentence of the summary of LenkaBula's 2006 thesis 'Bioprospecting and intellectual property rights on African plant commons and knowledge', reads as follows:

This study engages in an ethical examination of contemporary socio-ecological and economic issues which take serious the plight of African, African communities, indigenous knowledge and biodiversity. It studies the impact of bioprospecting, biopiracy and intellectual property rights regimes on the protection, use, access to, and conservation of biodiversity and indigenous knowledge in Africa. (p. iii)

This study demonstrates a significant degree of 'this-worldliness' in that:

- It is contemporary.
- It addresses socio-ecological and economic issues.
- It is contextual, finding its context in African communities.
- It focuses on contemporary injustice, namely the awarding of intellectual property rights to companies of the northern hemisphere.
- The ethics presented are social and ecological, based on *botho/ubuntu* and justice.

The thesis exposes the faces of northern pharmaceutical companies that exploit African knowledge and plant commons. The thesis is especially critical of the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), an agreement that favours intellectual property rights regimes. Looking for an ethical alternative, based on the African concept of *botho/ubuntu* and a biblical understanding of justice, the thesis chooses the African Model Law, which enhances ecological life, the lives of local communities and women (LenkaBula 2006:213). Although the African Model Law is not a religious model, LenkaBula supports it with the notion that God is the Creator and Sustainer of the Earth and that God seeks justice for all (LenkaBula 2006:178).

In summary, the thesis prominently deals with this-worldly realities from an ethical point of view that is relevant and current, an ethics that is both religious and beyond religion.

LenkaBula's lecture in 2007 at the World Council of Churches carries the concept of 'contemporary' in its title, 'Geneva 1966 and contemporary concerns for ecological and gender justice'. It argues that gender and ecological justice need to be combined for God's creation to reach its full integrity here and now (2007a:78). As far as ecological justice is concerned, the granting of intellectual property rights to companies that regard the Earth's resources as human inventions that can be commercialised should be condemned (2007a:81). Ethics should be carried out by Christian discipleship in the contemporary world (2007a:77).

These are the words of a this-worldly ethic on its way to contemporary ecological justice.

In 'Poverty, wealth and wellbeing and African feminist Christian ethics', LenkaBula (2008b) broadens the sources of ecological justice beyond including only the Bible, which, of course, also points to a liberal view of religious this-worldliness. For an African feminist Christian theology on ecological justice, women's experiences are included, as well as the insights of the modern ecological movement. As far as

the Bible is concerned, LenkaBula (2008b:254) finds wisdom in the prophets who expressed their discontent with an economy based on land-grabbing kings and other powerful and rich people. She (2008b:255) identifies with Church Fathers like Chrysostom, who warned against wealth, stating that God has not created people to be poor or rich. Concluding with the Christianity of the day, LenkaBula (2008b:257–258) urges churches not only to reflect but also to get actively involved in addressing ecological injustices, and theologians to be practical and ethical in embodying the fact that all people are created in the image of God when advocating ecological justice. Indeed, ecological justice needs to become a reality in this world.

In 'Beyond Anthropocentricity – *Botho/Ubuntu* and the quest for economic and ecological justice in Africa', LenkaBula (2008a) (re)introduces *botho/ubuntu* as a this-worldly term *par excellence*, even superseding any insight from Christian ethics. However, she (2008a) describes *botho/ubuntu* very much in terms of the Creator-God, who is actively involved and part of the web of life:

The economic and ecological appeal of *botho/ubuntu*, especially in relation to justice, is explicit in the understanding that human life cannot be full unless it is lived within a web of interactions of life, which includes, along with human beings, also creation. (p. 377)

In summary, LenkaBula proposes an ethics for ecological justice in this world, which is contextual, practical and a combination of *botho/ubuntu*-biblical-feminist insights.

Decolonisation as ecological justice

LenkaBula (2006:108–132), in her thesis, devotes chapter 5 to relating the colonisation of Africa to contemporary bioprospecting and Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). She does this by exposing how colonising countries employ international law to claim legal ownership of land, indigenous knowledge and plants in Africa. The colonisation of Africa started centuries ago, using the concept of *terra nullius*, which is the notion that Africa's land was empty and not owned by anyone (LenkaBula 2006:108). This *terra nullius* tactic has now re-emerged, she argues, with TRIPS allowing the conversion of public commons and indigenous knowledge in Africa (and in other developing countries) to private property for bioprospecting northern companies (LenkaBula 2006:116), while Africans are exploited and treated unfairly, as was the case during colonialism.

The answer lies, according to LenkaBula, in decolonising the African mind. Africans should not passively accept the rhetoric of bioprospecting companies that claim their activities are beneficial to Africa. Africans should be actively involved in seeking environmental justice and seriously engage in seeking alternatives to 'bioprospecting, economic globalisation and TRIPS' (LenkaBula 2006:132).

Playing major roles in this decolonisation of African minds are, as could be expected, African feminist Christian ethics (LenkaBula 2007a:77–86, 2008b:239–260) and the African notion of *botho/ubuntu* (LenkaBula 2008a:375–394).

Implications for the science and religion debate

Because this article is based on a paper given at the 2025 conference of the South African Science and Religion Forum (SASRF) on 'Echoes of eco-discourses', it is relevant to note what contribution Puleng LenkaBula makes to the science and religion debate. LenkaBula's views on ecological justice were a relevant topic for this conference, especially the way in which she creatively moves between scientific findings and religious insights. South African Science and Religion Forum was founded in 1993 by the (now) Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR) at Unisa to establish an interdisciplinary forum where theologians and natural scientists could enter into dialogue. Du Toit (1997) describes one of the aims of the science and religion debate in South Africa as:

The realisation of the inter-relatedness of knowledge ... While science seems to offer some models of interpretation to re-contextualise the biblical creation stories, religion offers the spiritual dimension many scientists look for against which to portray their findings. (n.p.)

The following are a few interfaces between science and religion that LenkaBula knowingly or unknowingly engages with:

- LenkaBula's view of creation is creationist. God has created the Earth, and the biblical creation stories testify to this. Scientists in the science and religion debate would reject creationist views. LenkaBula – known for expressing herself against fundamentalism – opens creation talk to eco-discourses that invite both scientists and spirituality specialists: because God has created the Earth, it is also a site for ecological justice.
- LenkaBula's view of creation, then, is 'scientific' because she views it as a site where science is conducted and intellectual property rights are given for humans to commercialise plant commons as medicine. She asks for a just relationship between science and ethics. She offers a combination of Christian feminist ethics, *botho/ubuntu* indigenous insights and a scientifically based African Model Law as a mixed approach to move towards ecological justice.
- LenkaBula, knowingly or unknowingly, centralises the question in the science and religion debate of whether *botho/ubuntu* – which incorporates but also transcends Christian ethics – is powerful and practical enough to stop and correct the 'scientific' colonisation of Africa.
- LenkaBula's view on salvation as 'this-worldly' invites a vigorous science and religion debate on the role of science in ecological liberation.
- LenkaBula broadens the sources for ecological justice beyond the wisdom of the Bible on God as a Creator of equals to include women's experiences and scientific talk on ecology, simultaneously broadening the science and religion debate for all kinds of sources to engage with and enrich one another.

Conclusion

This article aimed to conduct a content analysis of the academic works of Puleng LenkaBula, in which she expresses her views on ecological justice. This includes her 2006 doctoral thesis and four subsequent academic articles from 2007 to 2008. LenkaBula produced these works while she was lecturing in theological ethics at the University of South Africa. The content analysis focused on three themes within ecological justice. Firstly, LenkaBula works with an image of God as the Creator of equality between people and between people and creation. God is also the God of justice for God's creation. Justice here refers to gender, economic and ecological justice, which are interconnected. Secondly, LenkaBula liberates ethics from being solely religious, as well as from being otherworldly. Her this-worldly treatment of ethics pushes her to read the Bible for its liberative content and to extend it to other sources, such as women's experiences of an unjust world, scientific research on ecology as well as indigenous knowledge and the African concept of *botho/ubuntu*. Thirdly, LenkaBula engages in decolonising the mind, indigenous knowledge, land and products of Africa to move towards ecological knowledge.

Thus, she contributes to the science and religion debate by opening up creation as a site for discussing ecological justice from a variety of ethical positions.

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Competing interests

The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

CRedit authorship contribution

Christina Landman: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

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Disclaimer

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